Interview with John Sylvester Jr.

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

JOHN SYLVESTER, JR.

Interviewed by: Jeff Broadwater

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Q: In Mr. Sylvester's office, in Raleigh, North Carolina. Mr. Sylvester, could I begin by just asking you to say something about your early life and background.

SYLVESTER: Well, my family was all a Navy family. My father graduated in the Class of '26 from the Naval Academy. And my mother's father was Admiral Harry E. Yarnell, who was later commander in chief of the Asiatic Fleet in 1936-39, when my father was his flag lieutenant (a fine bit of nepotism).

But my first exposure to life overseas was as a child, living in Shanghai, Tsingtao, Baguio and Hong Kong, between 1936 and '39. I saw then the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War, and thus the beginning of World War II.

Q: You would have been fairly young during World War II, but where were you during the war?

SYLVESTER: My father went off to the South Pacific and fought in some of the naval battles off Guadalcanal, and then, later, in the Leyte Gulf Battle. I lived during the war years in Newport, Rhode Island, where my grandfather had retired and my mother stayed close.

Q: And then you went to Williams College after the war.

SYLVESTER: Yes, I went to Phillips Academy, Andover, and then went to Williams, where I was a history major and wrote a thesis on Communism and the Spanish Civil War.

When I graduated in '52, I enlisted in the Army and went off as a rifleman in the Korean War, arriving in Korea, I think it was March '53, where I saw the last four months of the war. We were on the central front, first in the so-called Iron Triangle near Chorwon, and then, in the very last days of the war, at an area called the Oxreider Skyline Drive, which was just west of the so-called Punchbowl. I was on line the last day of the war. In fact, the worst we had it was the last two hours of the war, when the Chinese forces opposite us dumped all the remaining ammunition on us. And it was a very eerie feeling, because we'd been called back earlier in the day, and told the war would end that day. We went back to our bunkers, and then, suddenly, at eight o'clock sharp, the Chinese opened up with all their remaining artillery and mortar ammunition. That lasted until about quarter of ten, and it began to trail off. Then, at ten o'clock, it was dead silence, and it was a very eerie feeling.

My assistant platoon sergeant, somebody told me, was the last American killed in the war. He was hit during that bombardment and died shortly after the war ended.

Q: Were you an officer?

SYLVESTER: No, I was a private, later made sergeant in the days after the war.

Q: For the benefit of the transcriber, did you say Oxrider?

SYLVESTER: It was called Oxreider; I think it was named after somebody. It was a very mountainous part in eastern Korea, just south of the famous Diamond Mountains. And it was one ridge line after another. I remember getting up at dawn, as you do, of course; you could see little cooking-fire smoke plumes coming out of the front of the mountains, one

after another, north of us, which indicated that the Chinese forces had dug through the mountains. Very extensive tunneling evidenced that, at that stage of the war, it would have been impossible to have attacked on the ground in that area, going to the north. It was a stalemated, kind of World-War-I-type war at that point.

Q: How did you become interested in the Foreign Service?

SYLVESTER: Well, it was very vague. Like a lot of my colleagues, I think I knew very little of what it was about, except that it dealt with foreign countries. I probably confused it with the Foreign Legion or such. But because of my childhood and my war years in the Far East, I just had a general interest in the outside world. It seemed like a profession that would give you travel, give you new experiences. And that was certainly true.

Q: Now you joined the Foreign Service in 1955, is that correct?

SYLVESTER: Right.

Q: I wanted to ask you about that, because that is right after the heyday of McCarthyism and the purge of the China hands and all that. What was it like to enter the Foreign Service in 1955, after all that controversy had developed?

SYLVESTER: My group of twenty officers was the first class that had been pulled together for the entering officers' course for many years, because of the McCarthy effect. It was interesting, we were an older group. I was one of the younger, actually, at twenty-five. One of the guys was a man named John Reed, a very bright guy, who had trouble getting in the Foreign Service because his namesake uncle was buried in the Kremlin wall. We had John Foster Dulles come to speak to us, because it was an event having that group together. There were some very able guys in the group. I guess the one who was most successful was Ambassador Richard Murphy, who went on to become a Near East specialist and is still prominent in that field.

Q: What did you think of Dulles?

SYLVESTER: The only personal contact we had was that one talk he gave shortly before he resigned and then, of course, died of cancer. He was an articulate man. I had no first-hand knowledge of him, except he certainly did have kind of a primness about him. And the accounts you read in the history books, the image that those books conveyed, seemed warranted by that one short look I had of him.

Q: He comes across as a kind of dour, stern Calvinist in some of the history books. Is that unfair?

SYLVESTER: Yes, he seemed a stern man of intense conviction. But, again, my look at him was too shallow to make a judgment.

Q: Did you know any of the members of that older generation of Far Eastern specialists—John Patton Davies or John Carter Vincent? Did you have any contact with any of those folks?

SYLVESTER: I had close contact with one, a fine man named John Emerson, who was the deputy chief of mission at the embassy in Tokyo when I was stationed as a young officer there. He worked for Ambassador Reischauer. And John had been a China hand. He'd come in the occupation at the early stages and had been sent by General MacArthur's headquarters out to Sugamo Prison to arrange the release of the political prisoners who were there, which included the Communists. And this became one thing on his record that was a black mark in the eyes of the McCarthy people.

Q: That name is just vaguely familiar. What happened to him?

SYLVESTER: Well, Emerson survived. It certainly didn't help his career, but he was a talented, very decent, bright man, a good linguist, good in Japanese, many talents, good piano, a friendly guy. But you could see the tracks of the McCarthy experience. Some

Japanese right-wingers complained about him being assigned to the embassy, and used to write letters to the ambassador, and I think probably the secretary of state, complaining about his presence, as if somehow this were polluting American policy. But fortunately for John, he survived. But he never got his embassy; he never became an ambassador himself, and I understand this was a direct result of the McCarthy criticism that still lingered in the halls of Congress.

Q: My impression of the ones who survived was that they either weren't promoted or they were transferred out of the Far East and maybe sent to Europe or someplace.

SYLVESTER: Well, John Emerson survived, he came back to Japan, he got the senior position: he just didn't get an embassy of his own, because of the confirmation process in the Senate. Apparently one or two of the right-wing senators had indicated that they would make an issue of it.

Q: I need to check one more spelling. You said that was Sagamu Prison?

SYLVESTER: Yes, I think it's... I'm embarrassed to say I forget the Japanese spelling. I think it's Sugamo.

Q: I was close. Some of these Japanese names may give the transcriber some trouble, so I want to try...

SYLVESTER: That was a major Japanese prison, and then, after our occupation began, the war criminals were imprisoned there, and the trial of General Toj and the others took place there.

Q: Did you feel threatened or intimidated as a young Foreign Service officer by the McCarthyites and by what some of your predecessors had been through?

SYLVESTER: No, I never did. I think it lingered on in the older people. But by the time I entered the Foreign Service, '55, McCarthy was dead and it was changing. It was,

however, a conservative period in the United States. Anti-Communism was still the principal motif of our foreign policy. And you could see that in the way that Ambassador Douglas MacArthur II carried out his embassy in Japan in those years.

Q: How was it that you came to be assigned to Japan?

SYLVESTER: It was a slightly disillusioning process. When I came in the Foreign Service, our class was asked where they would like to go. And I actually wanted to go to Europe; I'd never been to Europe. But the person who spoke to us said that we all had to understand that Europe was the most popular and your chances of not getting it were fairly strong. So I thought carefully and decided to put down on my so-called wish list my second choice, which was to go back to the Far East. And then everyone who asked for Europe went there. And me, being Sylvester, I was almost at the end of those, as they announced the assignment posts.

Q: They were made alphabetically?

SYLVESTER: Yes, they read them out alphabetically to our group of twenty. They got down to me and said I was assigned to Pusan, Korea. I'd just come back from Pusan a year before, which was a real dump then. It's actually a very interesting place, and I was there months ago.

But I was not happy about that, so I went in, rather crestfallen, to Personnel the next day, just to report in that I would be ready to go off to Pusan when the course ended. And they said, “Oops. Sylvester, Sylvester... Your assignment has been changed and you're going to Hong Kong.”

I was happy, and I went over and started basic Chinese language and took that for about a month and a half.

I went back one day to Personnel, to report in, and they said, “Oops. Sylvester. Your assignment has been changed. You're going to Okinawa.”

Well, in the end, I went to Yokohama.

So I was slightly disillusioned at how government worked by then. But it was probably a good lesson.

Q: Did you ever figure out what was going on with those assignment changes?

SYLVESTER: It was just the normal Mixmaster effect of Personnel's assignment needs.

Q: Now your first post was in Yokohama, at the consulate there. What were your duties there?

SYLVESTER: It was a typical consulate. I did the full range of consular and administrative work. I started as a citizenship and passport officer, which was dealing then with the remaining cases of Nisei who'd been sent back to Japan either during the war or after the war and were trying to regain their American citizenship. It was kind of a sad aftermath of the wartime hysteria. Then I did shipping services, which involved some rather interesting cases of seamen who'd gotten into trouble. Then later, a little bit of visa work. And then, for a while, the normal administrative chores of the consulate general.

It was a handsome building, modeled on the White House, that was on the Yokohama waterfront, and later, like a lot of our buildings in Japan, was sold off. For a while it was made into a beer hall. I went back then and had a beer at exactly the place my desk had been as a vice consul. Finally it was destroyed and a Japanese hotel erected on the site.

Q: Now you said these Japanese-Americans were former citizens, and you were trying to help them return to the United States.

SYLVESTER: During the war, as you know, many Japanese-Americans were put in concentration camps. And some of them, who were pro-Japanese during the war, namely just out of resentment at how they'd been treated by their own government, were shipped back to Japan. When the war was over, in the post-war misery, with their roots in many cases being actually in the United States more than in Japan, they applied to regain American citizenship. They formally petitioned for this through the consular procedures, and we would forward their petitions to Washington, with information on their cases, and they would be acted on. It took many years before these all were finished off.

Q: How many of these kinds of cases did you handle?

SYLVESTER: By my time, they'd grown to be a lesser trickle rather than a flood. But even then, in '55-56, I think I handled at least one or two a week, probably.

Q: You were then assigned to the Economic Section of the American Embassy in Tokyo. How did your duties change when you moved to the U.S. Embassy?

SYLVESTER: I'd taken two years of Japanese language training at the Embassy Language School, which was an excellent course, and then went in as a rather raw officer into the Economic Section and worked on East-West trade issues. We were trying to persuade the Japanese not to sell too much to the Soviets or to the Chinese Communists. There were the COCOM regulations, which limited the types of strategic articles that they could sell.

Occasionally, we'd have a real issue. The one I remember was wide-diameter pipe for the Soviets to build an oil pipeline from the Urals all the way into Western Europe. We were trying to persuade Japan not to sell the pipe.

I also reported on things as the Japanese companies did get involved with China and the Soviet Union. They had a fair amount of trade, and we were just trying to follow it and see what they did.

Q: What kind of influence, or maybe pressure, did you bring to bear on the Japanese to discourage them from engaging in that kind of trade? What kind of leverage did you have in that position?

SYLVESTER: My superiors, occasionally, when it was a significant issue, would go in. The minister for economic affairs, when I was there, was an excellent man, Philip Trezise, a fine economist, a very savvy man on Japan. And occasionally, when there was an issue that Washington took seriously, he would go in to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, occasionally with me in tow, and make an issue out of it.

Q: What was the attitude of the Japanese in those kinds of meetings? How did they respond to these overtures?

SYLVESTER: They would cooperate, but they would be skeptical, I think. They thought we were too ideological, too fixated on these issues. But the ties with the United States were so important to Japan that they weren't going to jeopardize them over relatively minor amounts involving trade with the Communist countries. So they were usually responsive when we wanted to make an issue out of it.

Q: Did it make a difference whether you were talking about trade with the People's Republic of China as opposed to the Soviet Union?

SYLVESTER: Well, at that time, not too much difference. The Japanese did, and still, find the Soviets, the Russians, very difficult to deal with. China, they thought, was a difficult market, but a market with more prospects in the long run. When I started, it was a period when the Chinese were being very hard-nosed to Japan.

I came, I think, shortly after there was a rather strange incident called the Nagasaki flag incident, when a young Japanese right-winger ripped down a paper Chinese Communist flag at a postage-stamp exhibit at a department store in Nagasaki. It got in the newspaper, and Beijing, the Chinese Communist leadership, decided to make it an issue with Japan. They blew it up and then put a total embargo on trade with Japan, to try to pressure them on some of the political issues at that time.

The Japanese were quite disconcerted, although it didn't achieve the results the Chinese expected. The Japanese trading companies, like Mitsubishi or Shoji or Mitsui Bussan, founded what were called dummy companies. For instance, there was one, Meiwa Sangyo, which was a known dummy for, I believe, Mitsui Bussan. And they just let them carry out the trade with Communist China. These companies would act in a friendly fashion; that is, the president of the company would echo the Chinese political line at the time, so that the Chinese would approve of them politically. It was all subterfuge, a Kabuki phenomenon that the Japanese companies found useful in continuing their trade with China.

China wanted the Japanese imports and wanted to sell to Japan, so they themselves kind of went along with this subterfuge. And then, finally, the whole thing evaporated with the passage of time.

Q: By the time you arrived in Japan, the Japanese economy was really starting to take off. Were you surprised by the speed with which Japan recovered from the war? What was your thinking about that as an economics officer there?

SYLVESTER: Looking back on it, my own thoughts, I think, were thin. I think, generally, Americans were surprised at the speed of the recovery. But it was not an easy, very fast process. When I got to Japan as a Foreign Service officer in '55, there were still large sections of Yokohama that were burnt-out fields, just ashes. I remember going down by Yokohama Harbor and hearing an ungodly noise coming out of kind of a warehouse

building. It turned out to be a truck fender factory. And the way that they were making truck fenders then was not through a gigantic press, like they would now, but it was an individual workman, with a hammer and a flat piece of metal, which he would pound on top of a wooden form until it became the shape of a fender. It wasn't a rich country, by any means, then.

But my timing, in one sense, was very good, because '55 was just about the end of the post-war miseries and the real beginning of Japanese prosperity, I think. And as the years went along, you could see it: people were well clothed, they began to eat well, the stores got fancier and fancier, you began to see more private cars on the road, traffic increased steadily. All the elements of prosperity, year by year, were becoming much more evident during the ten years of my duty there.

Q: Was that something that you tried to explain to your superiors in Washington? How do you explain it, I guess that's what I'm asking.

SYLVESTER: My superiors, Ambassador MacArthur, Minister Trezise, would make a real point of it with visitors, that Japan had a very vigorous industrial economy. This had to be pointed out to the American visitors at that time, because the image was still of a broken-down Japan, one that was just pulling itself together from the destruction of war.

I remember Ambassador MacArthur had a standard briefing that he gave to one group of visitors after another. And like anybody who gives the same talk, the same briefing, time after time, you begin to can it and you have the same expressions. He had one which I think was something like “Japan is the Ruhr of Asia.” His experience was in Germany and France, and the similes he would bring up, that this was like the great belt of industry along the Rhine, that Japan had the same sort of massive industrial capacity that north France, West Germany, and the United States had.

It was a lesson that American business had to be told at that time, because it was not self-evident.

Q: There was one event that came up in 1960 in Japan that I wanted to ask you about, and that was the debate over the adoption of a new security treaty with the United States. I don't know if you would have been directly involved in that or not, but I was just wondering what you remember about that. Do you remember? There was a lot of opposition to it. I think President Eisenhower was going to visit the country and decided to cancel his visit. Do you remember that?

SYLVESTER: My duties were not officially with the negotiation of the security treaty, but I arrived in the embassy, in the chancery, at exactly the time that the major demonstrations and riots began over the revision of the security treaty. And it was an awesome sight, because I think there were up to a half-million Japanese, on some days, who made a circuit that went by the National Police Agency, the Diet, the prime minister's official residence, and then came by the front of the American Embassy. There was this sea of Japanese who were chanting “Amgo hantai!” (Against the security treaty!) “Amgo hantai! Amgo hantai!” It was an almost hypnotic, roaring chant.

And it was a popular thing; the Asahi and the other newspapers generally supported the demonstrations. It was a mass phenomenon.

My future wife was a member of a theater group, which, like most Japanese cultural groups, had left-wing inclinations, and a lot of them would participate in this, and then later in the evening would drop off at my house for a drink.

The whole atmosphere was one of enormous tension.

I remember being in the lobby of the embassy when Mr. Hagerty, Eisenhower's press secretary, arrived from the airport. He'd been in a car that had gotten caught in a student demonstration then. The students had rocked the car and stomped on it. He'd finally been

rescued and brought to the embassy by American helicopter. And they were very shaken, with good reason.

Q: Why was the treaty so controversial?

SYLVESTER: I think there were a variety of reasons. In one sense, the context of it was the very beginning of the youth revolution that was to hit us in the 1960s. The radical youth leaders of Tokyo University and so forth were very prominent in the disturbances.

In part, it was the strength of the left generally in Japan at that time. The left, particularly the Communists, had stood against the Japanese militarists, and they emerged from the war with prestige, the right wing having been disgraced by having led Japan into that disastrous war. The left saw Communism, Socialism as the wave of the future. They saw the Americans as capitalists, as imperialists. They saw the security treaty as tying Japan to American militarism.

The public was deeply pacifist after the tragedy of the war and was not really sympathetic to being tied to a military agreement with the United States, even though the leaders thought it essential in this dangerous post-war world.

There were many reasons, but it all came together in part because the prime minister at that time, Nobusuke Kishi, was a somewhat Nixon-like figure, a man who had been a minister in prewar governments, in Prime Minister Tojo's cabinet, and was once again the leader of Japan, and he was the one who was pushing the security treaty through the National Diet. In the end, they had to force it over against a rowdy filibuster by the opposition parties within the Diet. And that action, plus Kishi's personality, became the final crux of the security treaty riots.

When it all finished, when Kishi was forced out of office, the whole thing deflated like a balloon that's lost its air.

Q: I had read that. Did any of the hostility toward the treaty, or toward American policy generally, manifest itself in any hostility on the part of the Japanese toward American Foreign Service people working in Japan? And were you the target of hostility as a representative of the American government?

SYLVESTER: No, there was very little real anti-Americanism in the whole phenomenon. It was a protest about American policy, about Japanese government policy, about the personality of Kishi, but the Japanese as a whole tended to be rather friendly to Americans. And I found this true even of many among the political left. I later got to know a number of Socialist Diet members and opposition politicians, and they'd be as friendly as everybody to Americans. The Communists were usually professionally hostile to us and would stay away from us and so forth, but there was very little overt anti-Americanism.

Q: I want to ask you at least one more question about Japan. Edwin Reischauer would have been ambassador at the time you left, or at least you would have served through his tenure as ambassador. Could you tell me a little bit about him, what kind of ambassador he was, how well you knew him?

SYLVESTER: I thought he was a very fine man and an excellent ambassador. He was a man of good sense, of friendliness, of enormous understanding of Japan. His manner of working with the Japanese was what was necessary in the post-security-treaty period. He was an excellent choice, and I think he was an example of how a non-career ambassador, if well chosen, can be among certainly the best choices.

I think the only fault was, he was not experienced in the ways of Washington, like Ambassador Douglas MacArthur II was, and I think he had more trouble getting Washington to do things than a more experienced bureaucrat might have had.

But he was very proper for the times. I was a junior officer; I knew him and I called on him several times after he retired and went back to Harvard, and then after he ultimately retired from there. I thought the world of him.

I think his hardest problem, when I was there, was the negotiations for the reversion of Okinawa. Okinawa had been essentially run as an American military colony after our bloody victory there during the war, and the American military authorities were very reluctant to see it returned to Japan, or even to share in its governance with Japanese authorities. But the essential problem was that Okinawa was still desperately poor at a time when the main islands of Japan were increasingly prosperous. The Japanese government regarded Okinawa as part of Japan. They wanted its return, they wanted to bring the living standard of the people of Okinawa up to mainland standards, and they wanted to offer money to help this process. And we were in this ridiculous posture of refusing Japanese financial help to the island, because the military authorities felt that that was baloney tactics, that the Japanese would use that as the entr#e and then steadily erode the ability of our senior military authorities to govern Okinawa as we thought was necessary. Ambassador Reischauer had to argue that in the long run this was absolutely necessary for American interests, that Okinawa was very important to our military, but that good relations with Japan and a healthy relationship with the security treaty was far more important to the United States than an ability to run Okinawa just as we wanted. But General Caraway, who was the general in charge in Okinawa when Reischauer first went, was a hard-line person, and he deeply resented Reischauer's policy recommendations. And there were some sour relations between the Army headquarters in Okinawa and the embassy. But after General Caraway left, his successors were quite broad-gauged generals, and the mood in the Pentagon in Washington also changed. And by the time Ambassador Reischauer finished his embassy appointment, very substantial progress had been made on the Okinawa issues.

Q: I was going to ask you about that. While it was eventually returned to Japan, it was after Reischauer had left.

SYLVESTER: Yes, it was 1972 when it finally took place. But the whole process had been put well under way by Reischauer. Another officer who was very instrumental in the process was Richard Sneider, who later became ambassador to Korea. And his officer, Howard McElroy, who later worked for me, was a very able junior officer on that issue.

Q: I want to ask you some questions about Vietnam, but before we get to Vietnam, I know you spent at least one year in the White House, on the White House staff, in 1967, I think?

SYLVESTER: Yes.

Q: Could you tell me a little bit about that, what your duties were and how you came to join the White House staff?

SYLVESTER: Well, I was taken over essentially as a flunky. The White House, under President Johnson, tried to make a point of being a very lean operation, a parsimonious operation. So they covered all their expenses by borrowing everything from other government departments; they'd levy a photocopier from the Pentagon or a junior officer from State. And I was brought over to help in the office of the special assistant for the Vietnam civil policy, the pacification program. It was run by a very capable, rather acerbic ex-CIA officer named Robert Komer, and he had as a deputy Ambassador William Leonhart, a very bright senior Foreign Service officer. And I just worked for Leonhart, basically shuffling his papers.

But it was interesting to watch, because what Komer and Leonhart were trying to do was make a sensible, concerted effort on the civil side in Vietnam. In Vietnam, until that period, we had both military and civilian advisors in the countryside. And all the agencies were represented, not only Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, Marines, and so forth, but the U.S. Information Agency, or agricultural advisors under AID. It was clearly necessary

to get everybody to work together, which they weren't doing very well up to that period. Komer was brought in to spearhead this, and he, working with the embassy in Saigon and the MACV authorities, finally combined the whole effort in the countryside of Vietnam as a joint effort.

For instance, the advisors, working with a Vietnamese province chief, who up to then would go in individually to present their problems or what they wanted to push on..., all worked, after that, for one person, the province senior advisor. The military advisors and the civilian advisors were wedded together. In one province, you'd have an Army lieutenant colonel be the senior advisor, and he'd have a civilian deputy, an AID guy or a Foreign Service officer on loan. In the next province, it would be the other way around; the civilian might be the senior guy.

Komer was pushing this all from the Washington end, trying to get it all to gel. And there were many, many problems, like getting supplies through the congested port of Saigon, trying to get the Vietnamese corps commanders to focus on the civilian side as well as their straight military duties.

And it was well done. Komer pushed very hard. He was an abrasive but effective man. He later went out to work as a deputy for the commander of MACV in Saigon, quite successfully.

Q: What was MACV?

SYLVESTER: The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. And that took in, in the end, all American military activities, plus the pacification program, in Vietnam.

Q: Did you think the White House was putting enough emphasis on pacification while you were there?

SYLVESTER: Yes, well that came straight down from the president.

The only time I ever personally met a president was when Komer took us over one day, his, I think, seven or eight officers, to meet President Johnson in the Fish Room, his conference room in the White House. Johnson lived up to every story I'd ever heard about him: he was press-the-flesh; he was dominating; he was funny; he was acerbic. But he was also very interested in the particulars of the civil programs. For instance, What was the price of pork in Saigon?, an indicator of how the civilian economy was going. And he questioned Komer, I thought, intelligently and well about the issues.

There was one funny thing. Johnson hated to have his staff take vacations, but somehow Komer had persuaded Johnson to let him take a week of leave, going over to France with his family. And Johnson, in this meeting that we were in, kidded, or actually rode, Komer pretty heavily about goofing off for a week. Finally, he turned to the rest of us and said, “Now I hope you all will go home tonight, take a good long vacation, and then come back refreshed tomorrow morning.”

But it was very interesting, and Komer was clearly following what the president wanted as he did this.

Q: Did your experience in Japan influence your thinking about the Vietnam War? My impression is that the Japanese generally weren't very supportive of American involvement. What did you think about that?

SYLVESTER: It probably influenced me some, but I think I was probably more influenced by my honors thesis in college on the Spanish Civil War, because there were many parallels between the war in Vietnam and the war in Spain, 1936-39. They were both cockpits for the great power conflicts of their era, yet they were also brutal civil wars. I felt strongly about the values of the war in Spain, generally favoring the republican side. And I thought one of the great lapses that led to World War II was the failure of the democracies to assist the side in Spain that to the largest extent shared their values. And I felt, in Vietnam, that we had a duty to try to help people who shared our values, to the extent that

you have them in a developing country like that. And I felt the Republic of Vietnam, despite its many faults, was a semi-democracy and that we had a duty to help them.

Q: Now you went to the Mekong Delta in 1968, is that right?

SYLVESTER: Right.

Q: Could you tell me about that? Why did you go, or how did you get that assignment?

SYLVESTER: Well, I volunteered for it. I was working on the Thai Desk after I finished my short duty in the White House. A friend of mine came back; he'd been an advisor up in Hue. And listening to him, I realized it was something I wanted to do. So I volunteered for it, and I took a year of Vietnamese language training. I went there in August of '68, after Tet. I asked to go to the Mekong Delta because my brother had worked there and I was just interested in it, and was assigned in the Province of Chau-doc, which was a rather colorful province on the Cambodian border where the Mekong and the Bassac rivers enter Cambodia. It had an area that had been a traditional refuge for outlaws and people of new religions, called the Seven Mountains. The Hoa Hao people, one of the odd religious sects, were well represented there. I worked as a new-life development officer, which in essence was just economic development, and did many tasks. I was there for six months and then got promoted to become a deputy province senior advisor, working for a very fine Vietnamese-speaking Army colonel, Billy Stanberry, who was a very savvy, decent guy. This was in the Province of Kien-giang, right next to Chau-doc, in the town of Rach-gia. It was also a very interesting province, which went from the Communist stronghold of the U-minh Forest up to the Cambodian border, where there was a curious little town called Ha-tien. And I worked there for six months on the tasks of an advisory team, which included the civilian side and the straight military side.

Q: You said your brother had worked in the Mekong Delta. What had he done?

SYLVESTER: He was a Foreign Service officer also. He was a China specialist, a graduate of the Naval Academy. He'd been an all-weather interceptor pilot for six years, until he joined our business. After Chinese language training, he got assigned to Binh Xuyen in the Delta. I visited him there in '67, for my first look at Vietnam, and I'd heard all of his stories about it.

Q: What was his first name?

SYLVESTER: He was Charles Sylvester.

Q: And he influenced your decision to go?

SYLVESTER: Yes.

Q: You said that in Chau-doc, you worked in economic development. What kind of economic development activities?

SYLVESTER: Well, we were trying to bring a better life to the people. The activities could range from refugee relief, getting food to people who were displaced by the combat activity, to things that were really true development. We had an advisor there who was trying to get chicken-raising made more efficient. How do you raise large numbers of chickens at the lowest cost? He was very good and got some people going with, by our standards, small scale, but by Vietnamese standards, large-scale raising of chickens.

Q: I think Chau-doc had been the site of some fighting during the Tet Offensive, as I recall. What was the military situation like there when you arrived in the province?

SYLVESTER: By the time I got there, it had been stabilized. Chau-doc City had been half occupied in the course of the battle. And there was an Army enlisted man there who won the Congressional Medal of Honor as they retook the town. By my time, there was still a Communist presence down in the southern mountains, and that could be a little hairy at

times. The first times I heard gunfire were in that area, while I was stationed in Vietnam. But it was generally quiet. The Communists had been badly racked-up in the battle, just as they were across Vietnam. They'd taken terrible losses at Tet. Despite the political capital they gained out of that battle, militarily it was a disaster for them.

Q: How effective do you think the pacification program was generally in that area?

SYLVESTER: I thought it was very effective. It reflected Communist military weakness. The traditional Viet Cong units, the southern Communist units, had been so badly bloodied during the Tet Offensive, they just couldn't hold on to the land that they'd had before, and they were in general retreat across all of the Delta. And so the government was moving out and extending protection and prosperity to more and more of the countryside of the Mekong Delta. I don't think it was because of our civilian programs, but they certainly helped the process of making the people of the countryside glad to have the Communists gone and the government back.

Q: In 1969, you became senior advisor in Binh-long. That was along the Cambodian border to the north of where you had been. Was the situation there different than it had been in the Mekong Delta? Could you kind of compare and contrast the two regions?

SYLVESTER: The Mekong was archetypical South Vietnam. It was broad fields, semi-modern farming, fairly well populated, but more like Indiana than kind of the overcrowded Red River Delta around Hanoi. Binh-long, which was north of Saigon, again on the Cambodian border, was an area which had been forest until relatively recently, when the French, in the prewar years, hacked out a number of major rubber plantations. Terre Rouge (the Red Soil) was the name of one of them. It was a relatively thinly populated province, many Montagnards, mainly Stieng, a proto-Cambodian type people. The Vietnamese were in large part North Vietnamese who'd been brought in, sometimes under not very good circumstances, in the prewar years, to be the workers on the rubber plantations.

Our province town was called An-loc, and the province as a whole was relatively heavily fought over, both before, during, and after I was there. The so-called Fishhook area was just to our west, and M#m#t and Snuol, two French rubber plantation towns in Cambodia, were just on the northwest and north sides of the province. It was very easy for the Communist main force units, the 5th, 7th, and 9th Divisions, formerly Viet Cong, but by my time almost exclusively North Vietnamese main force units. And they would periodically come into the province to seek battles, hopefully to bloody the Americans, or the South Vietnamese Army units, and then retreat quickly over the border.When I was there, I think the worst action was when they hit an ARVN armored battalion, surprised it at night and inflicted fairly heavy losses on it, and then very quickly retreated out of the province again.

Then, after I left, during the 1972 offensive, they struck very heavily, occupied the northern district town of Loc-ninh, and then besieged An-loc, and the town took terrible losses. The ARVN, the regiment of the 5th Division that was there, the Ranger Battalion, and the local troops, who were under my province chief, a fine officer named Tram Van Nhut, withstood the Communist siege for months, greatly helped by our B-52s and our air support, which allowed them to survive.

Q: Was this during what is sometimes referred to as the Easter Offensive in '72?

SYLVESTER: Yes, this was the so-called Easter Offensive. It was a prelude to what took place at the very end of the war. But the Communists took such heavy losses at it, both around An-loc and then up by the demilitarized zone just north of Hue, that that, plus the so-called Christmas bombing by President Nixon, persuaded them that they had to change their strategy, and they signed that spurious peace agreement.

Q: Were you at Binh-long during the Cambodian invasion?

SYLVESTER: Yes.

Q: That would have been, I think, April-May 1970. You were there during that?

SYLVESTER: Yes, I was.

Q: Tell me a little bit about that.

SYLVESTER: Well, I followed it very closely. In fact, I went over the border myself a number of times, against orders, and I finally got officially rebuked for doing it, which I deserved. But I was very curious to know what was happening across the border, partly because it affected by own duties as province senior advisor.

We struck across the border very heavily with our forces, and it, I thought, was effective in part. We picked up enormous amounts of equipment that Communists had stockpiled there. The Communist main force units had this protected zone across the border. The local people, the Cambodians, the French planters in Cambodia, knew that they were not supposed to go into these zones. And they were a true sanctuary for the North. We did some bombing in there, the so-called secret bombing, but that was limited. It had some effect, but wasn't extensive enough really to trouble the Communists that much. When we struck across the border, it was very disconcerting to the North Vietnamese units, and they had to move rather quickly back further into Cambodia. It was only a partial success, as far as I could see. The North Vietnamese units decided to avoid combat, and except for some very minor scrapping, they just retreated out of range. The fact that we had limited the incursion and publicly stated it by President Nixon, meant that they just had to go further to enter new sanctuaries. But it certainly put their whole timetable back; they lost immense amounts of supplies.

The authors who are critical of the incursion say that, by doing it, we caused the war in Cambodia, or at least we broadened the war in Cambodia. I personally think that's a misreading of what happened.

The whole thing in Cambodia happened for Cambodian reasons: the Cambodian elite had gotten tired of Sihanouk's petty tyrannies and were distressed at how the Communist Vietnamese were essentially governing, on their own, the border areas of Cambodia proper. Finally, this resentment bubbled up and they mounted this coup against Sihanouk, which went faster and further than I think even the perpetrators in Phnom Penh had expected. Sihanouk did not come back to Cambodia, and the whole thing escalated such that they finally declared a republic of Cambodia, the Khmer Republic. As part of it, they told the Communist Vietnamese forces on the border that they had to leave Cambodia. The Vietnamese Communists were surprised and appalled at this and decided that they had no recourse but to reject this. In fact, when the Khmer army started to attack the Vietnamese Communist-held areas on the Cambodian border, the PAVN, the North Vietnamese forces, decided to generally counter and just sweep them all out, so that they could continue to control the sanctuaries on the border like they had before. And as part of it, they assisted the native Cambodian movement, which became the so-called Khmer Rouge. I think, for the Communist Vietnamese, Cambodia was always a sideshow; all that they were really trying for was to control the staging areas that they'd used in the war up to that point so well within Cambodia. But they fought against the forces of the Khmer Republic, put it very much on the defensive in the Chenla II campaign, and turned the task over to the Khmer Rouge. And then, very late in the game, were appalled to find that they'd lost control of the Khmer Rouge, and the Khmer Rouge had turned even against them, against any Vietnamese, including their Communist older brothers.

Q: You referred a minute ago to the secret bombing of Cambodia preceding the American invasion. How secret was that? Did you know about that before the invasion? Did you know about that at the time it was going on?

SYLVESTER: When I first became province senior advisor, the U.S. Air Force FAC (Forward Air Controller) who was assigned to my team took me up in his light observation plane for a trip around the borders of the province, so I could get a feel for what the

province was like. As we went along the west edge of Binh-long, you could see that the bomb craters from the B-52s of TAC Air continued right into Cambodia. I asked him about it, and he said, “Well, you know, the Communists don't respect the border there, so we bomb a certain extent into Cambodia to get them.” I recorded this. It seemed logical. I didn't realize it was supposed to be any secret. In fact, if some reporter had asked me later about it, I'm sure I would have told him. And only later did I discover that this was supposed to be a grand secret. I think quite a few people knew about it, certainly Sihanouk knew about it, the Communists knew about it. But the press never fixed on it as an issue until it came out.

Q: When you said, after the invasion you were officially reprimanded for going into Cambodia, why was that? Why were you not supposed to go into Cambodia, if there were American troops there?

SYLVESTER: Ambassador Colby, who headed the pacification program, felt that if you had American civilian advisors going in too, across the border, it had the implication that our government was getting involved in more than the straight military sense. He, and I think the Washington authorities, wanted to avoid that image. John Van and other senior advisors, before that directive came out, and I, had gone across at the beginning. And for good reasons, they put this order out. I should have obeyed it; I don't have any excuse, but what happened up in Snuol and M#m#t so affected my province, I just felt that I needed to know what was happening there. And partly because I did disobey orders, I think I was able to do a couple of things that were important.

Q: Could you elaborate on that, just briefly?

SYLVESTER: Well, one of them was rather a strange one. Well, two.

I arranged for Vietnamese who were in Cambodia across from Vietnam to be evacuated. I went over and talked to a number of them and said we would bring them out. And we did.

And it probably saved their lives, because later on, of course, the Khmer Rouge killed-off any Vietnamese still resident in Cambodia.

And second, when our forces were pulling out of Snuol, for some reason they were going to leave there the trucks of the rubber plantation. I think they had orders that they weren't supposed to loot anything, take anything out. But I thought it was foolish to leave all these fine trucks there—there were a lot of them—which would have been immediately picked up by the Communist forces and used for their supply. So I pressed on the issue, and finally the Army agreed, and they sent back a unit that picked up all these trucks and drove them out. They were actually later driven all the way down through Saigon to Phnom Penh.

Q: From 1970 to 1972, you were in Saigon, is that correct?

SYLVESTER: Yes.

Q: What were your duties there?

SYLVESTER: I was a branch chief for internal political affairs in the Political Section. It was a big embassy, and the hierarchy down to me was Ambassador Bunker, a very fine man; Deputy Ambassador Berger, a very able man; and then my two bosses, the political minister and the political counselor. I was a fifth level down, and I had seven officers, all but one of whom spoke excellent Vietnamese, who followed Vietnamese internal political affairs.

Q: How did you assess the prospects for the survival of the Saigon government when you were there in '71-72? I guess Thieu was president at that time.

SYLVESTER: Yes, President Thieu was there.

Well, it was hard to read the future, like always, but I think our feeling was that it was going to be difficult for the South to survive. They were equal in size with the North, but the North

was better disciplined; it was a totalitarian state; it had a well-led, highly experienced army. It had unity, partly because of what was possible under a Stalinist system. It was well led; the Communist leaders were effective.

The South was more sloppy; it was a more diverse society, with minorities of race and religion. The South was generally a more relaxed, laid-back area. You couldn't have the discipline of a Communist system. It was a semi-democracy, and so there was always political dispute.

Thieu was in many ways a very capable man, but he had his weak points. He was tolerant of some of his lieutenants, like General Quang, who were notoriously corrupt.

It was clearly going to be difficult for the South. And in the end, it always depended on a relatively consistent, relatively large amount of assistance from the United States, both material and psychological, and on American manpower. And if the United States was not consistent in this, I think we were always somewhat skeptical of the South's chances. Even in retrospect, I feel, if American support had been consistent, even at a lower level, the Republic of Vietnam might still be there. But we weren't.

Q: By '70, '72, the American commitment was clearly winding down.

SYLVESTER: Yes, it was winding down.

Q: What was the morale like in the U.S. Embassy? You said you knew that it would be difficult for the South to survive, it would need American support, and yet American support was dwindling. How did that affect the morale?

SYLVESTER: I don't think we had serious morale problems. Bunker and Berger were highly respected by all of us. There was a certain division by age in the embassy. The younger officers, stretching up probably to me, were somewhat more skeptical of Thieu, jaundiced about the chances. The senior leadership, I think, felt that the alternatives

were such that we had to work closely with the Thieu government and do our best. There was an age difference in viewpoint, both among the Foreign Service officers and our colleagues in the CIA, but it was not a morale issue.

Q: Did you anticipate that the American aid that you thought would be necessary would continue, or were you deeply worried about that at that time?

SYLVESTER: We worried about it. We thought it depended on strong political purpose at the top, in the Executive part of government. Clearly our public had turned against involvement in Vietnam. We were going to have to get out militarily. And when you pulled all those American divisions out of Vietnam, it cut the military force that defended Vietnam in half. So it was going to be far harder in the future. And I think we all knew that it became a much more iffy, a much more dangerous situation for the South. My own feelings were that we could still do it, if we did it well.

Q: What did you think of the peace treaty in '73?

SYLVESTER: I think I was skeptical. I was hopeful, but I was very skeptical. I felt the only way the peace agreement in '73 would survive, would be respected, would be if the Americans would police it. And that meant having a credible threat if the Communists violated it wholesale. And that depended on having a president who was politically viable. My own feeling is, Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger gave away too much in that agreement. But I give them the benefit of the doubt; I think they planned to try to enforce the agreement with American arms, a return of American air power, if the Communists violated the agreement wholesale. But when the Communists began their main-line offensive, first with the attack on Phuoc-long, in, I guess, '74, and there was no American response, Hanoi knew quite clearly that the Americans would not police the agreement that we'd signed.

Q: Were you surprised at how quickly South Vietnam collapsed in the face of this last North Vietnamese offensive, without American aid in '74?

SYLVESTER: I don't think I was surprised. As I remember, I felt, after the rout in Pleiku, that the end had come. In fact, a couple of friends of mine, knowledgeable guys, thought the South could still hang on, and I disagreed with them. I think, at that time, my judgment was fairly good.

Q: What led you to that conclusion?

SYLVESTER: Well, it was partly a trip I made back, in 1973, to Vietnam, when a friend of mine took me up on a long drive through III Corps, the back country of III Corps, an area that I'd known fairly well. And it was lonely; there just wasn't much military on our side there, since the American divisions had left. It was very clear that the South had so much less to defend with, and the ARVN divisions, at the very best, were going to be sorely stretched. I thought the ARVN was better than Americans gave them credit for, but it was an extremely difficult job to defend against a North Vietnamese offensive with the little that was left.

Q: Was it a lack of manpower, desertion, a failure to mobilize the resources, or what?

SYLVESTER: I think basically it was a lack of manpower. The South was on the defensive. We never encouraged it, trained it, to take the offense against North Vietnam. So it was a defensive force, and when you're on the defense, you need more. A lot of the troops were on static defense. The North had the initiative. And it was a big country; the highlands were a long way from the delta. You couldn't move troops up there easily to group your defenses when there was a North Vietnamese offensive. The South didn't have the mobility.

But it was beyond that, of course. The South Vietnamese generals, again, I thought, were better than Americans gave them credit for, but clearly they were spotty. You had very good ones, like General Truong up in I Corps, and you had very weak ones, who hadn't had much combat experience, who were essentially political generals.

So there was an assortment of weaknesses that all came into play.

I think, actually, the Communists were surprised at how easily their victory came, because they'd been fighting, before the collapse in April '75, hard, continuous battles up in I Corps, and the ARVN had given a very good account of themselves in those battles. They'd fought equally against the Northern units.

It's partly just the panic that comes with a bad defeat. American troops have experienced it in our history, too, at Bull Run, at Kasserine Pass, and so forth. We're not immune to that, when you begin to collapse and it all comes to pieces.

The final defeat was one in which the Southern units thought, not without reason, that their cause was hopeless. The Americans were no longer there to help them, and there just wasn't enough to hold the defense.

Q: Let me ask you about one more assignment, and that was the couple of years you spent in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. What was that, and what did you do there?

SYLVESTER: INR (as it's abbreviated) is an interesting organization. It's analytic; it's not an intelligence-collecting agency. It takes all the information, all the intelligence that can be found, which ranges from newspaper stories and CNN through the most highly classified CIA and NSA intelligence reports, and then analysts look at it, try to make sense out of it, and write reports for policymakers. So that the intelligence is boiled down to what a policymaker needs to know, what he needs to have in his mind when he makes decisions about what America should do in the world. The Central Intelligence Agency does the same thing: part of CIA is analytic; part of it operational. In a sense, is a competitor with CIA analysis, a check on CIA analysis. It was an alternative for the policymaker. And that's very healthy. A senior American official should have alternative views. It's a healthy phenomenon to have intelligence analysis come from at least a couple of sources to him.

Q: For whom were these reports prepared?

SYLVESTER: For the president, the secretary of state, all the officials of the Department of State, and it was given to anybody else senior in government, in the Pentagon or agency, who was interested.

Q: This would have been during the Carter administration?

SYLVESTER: Yes, I was there largely during the Carter period.

I think it was highly regarded. My last job was mainly as an editor; as my most senior position in the Foreign Service, I was in kind of a windowless cubicle, just editing. But it was a useful thing. We did, every day, something called the Morning Summary, which went to the president and down. It included spot intelligence—a report that X was happening in Guatemala or whatever. The front part of the Morning Summary was very short things like this that the official would read the first thing in the morning. The latter part of the Morning Summary was four short essays. As editor, I insisted that they be no more than one page, and that the premier thoughts be at the very beginning, so the policymaker, within the first two sentences, could get the whole import of what the analysis was. And we tried to make very well-written, very pertinent pieces, the most critical things that policymakers needed to know.

Q: Were you following things during the Carter administration such as the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan?

SYLVESTER: Yes, exactly. Exactly. Yes, those were hot items.

Q: I think those are about all the questions I've got. Anything I've left out you'd like to add?

SYLVESTER: Well, I guess I'd like to just talk a bit more about Vietnam.

Q: Okay.

SYLVESTER: In retrospect, I think one general conclusion that I've had was that Vietnam as a whole was such a diverse country, with all its minorities, all its different religious groups, the changes of geographical setting, and was a country, in recent years, where so much had happened, that an outside observer could look at the war in Vietnam and there was evidence for almost any sort of case that you wanted to make about it, that you could argue it in any way and find substantial facts or such to prove your case. So you could get very legitimate arguments about the thing from those who were staunch defenders of what the American government did there, to those who were most harshly critical of it. It was really, to my mind, a very gray situation, and the grays could range from the lightest of gray to the darkest of gray, and you could pick what you wanted to focus on.

My own feelings were, at the time and looking back on it, that our cause was worthy there, that what we tried to do was in the interests of the people of Vietnam, that if we had been successful in what we did, the people of the south of Vietnam, perhaps all of Vietnam, would have been far better off. There never would have been the million and a half refugees that fled Vietnam after '75, the post-war poverty, and the purges through the so-called reeducation camps.

I thought we did a lot of things well there. A lot of the pacification program was intelligent and capably done.

We did some things not so well. They varied, to my mind, from individual programs, like the Ranch Hand program, where we dumped defoliant over the forests so that we could more easily spot Communist unit movements under the trees, which I thought was environmentally destructive and not very successful, because the undergrowth, the bamboo, rapidly grew up after you'd defoliated, to more major things, like we tended to over-Americanize the war, so that we built up a very heavy sense of dependence, among the Vietnamese, on America. They looked to America somehow to save them.

There was a phenomenon I found rather odd. In 1988, when I revisited Vietnam and talked to Communist officials, occasionally there were nuances in what they said that made me think that even they thought that now America somehow could save Vietnam from its economic problems and poverty.

Also, in the course of Americanizing the war, I thought we shoved the Vietnamese aside, often. In III Corps, when I was there, it was hard for the ARVN to get in a fight, because the American commanders were so anxious to get their units into battle. It was understandable, the American units were excellent, and the commanders wanted to do their best, so if there was any fight there, they were going to be in it. And so the ARVN, in those years, didn't get the experience, the training, to get ready for the time when we pulled out and left them.

Q: Do you think it's fair to criticize President Johnson for not doing more to educate American public opinion and to try to build political support in this country early on for the war? I get the impression, reading about Vietnam, sometimes, that by the time some of these programs, like pacification, began to bear some fruit, public opinion in this country had really turned against the war. There seemed to be a kind of disconnect, in a way, between what was happening in Vietnam and what was happening in the United States. I'd be kind of interested in your thoughts about that.

SYLVESTER: Well, clearly, as you look back, at the time of the Tonkin Gulf, we needed a more thorough debate on whether to go into that war or not. A friend of mine wrote a book on the Tonkin Gulf, and it was a murky incident. There wasn't enough to be the underpinnings of a decision of that magnitude to involve our country and a half-million young Americans in that distant war. We needed a more thorough national consensus before we went into it.

On the other hand, I don't think that any protracted war like that is ever going to retain American public support. We held the course during World War II partly because we

painted the Nazis and the Japanese in the starkest and most racist terms of evil, not without reason. In the Vietnam War, you couldn't describe it in such absolute terms. With Vietnamese on our side, you couldn't make it a racist war like we did in '41-45 in the Pacific. In any war like that, which is gray and ambiguous, it's just hard to retain public support for year after year, with the body bags coming back. I think, in retrospect, it was an impossible task, the way we did it.

Q: Anything else?

SYLVESTER: A couple of other comments. One is, why we went into the war. And it seems to me fairly clear. There were two great historical lessons, to my mind, which caused us to march into Vietnam the way we did.

One was the Munich syndrome, the whole lesson of our experiences of getting into World War II, which certainly shaped the viewpoint of people like Dean Rusk and Kennedy and Johnson, the feeling that you had to stop an aggressor early in the game, or later it was going to be far more costly, and that we'd done very little to stop the aggressors before '41. We survived the war well because the enemy did not have weapons that could reach our American homeland. But now, in the 1960s, the Communists, both Russian and Chinese, had nukes. And they sounded harsh and ambitious. Our leaders just were not going to repeat the errors of World War II. We were going to engage early with them and stop them, so they realized that there was no future in piecemeal aggression.

And the second great lesson, I think, which weighed very heavily, certainly with Johnson, was the abuse that the Democratic Party took for “losing China.” I think Kennedy would have been the same way. They were not going to lose another divided, partially Christian country to the Communists, on their beat of political responsibility. Johnson had seen the Democrats pilloried for years for having “lost China.” And here was Vietnam, a far smaller country, and he was not going to repeat that disaster.

I think those were the main factors—the lesson of World War II and the lesson of the “loss of China”—that impelled Kennedy and Johnson and their lieutenants to march us into Vietnam.

And, to be honest, I partially agree with that, even in retrospect.

One other thing I'd like to comment on, I guess, is democracy in South Vietnam, and President Thieu. Our support of South Vietnam was widely criticized for support of a dictator, President Thieu. South Vietnam was not a Vermont democracy, and it was hard to rally Americans to support it.

On the issue of democracy, it struck me, in one sense, that it was a bad rap, because there was a lot of political discourse in Saigon when I was there. There was an active political opposition. There was an opposition press; the political cartoons were often vicious about Thieu and the government.

The election for the national assembly when I was there was a reasonably good, honest election. For the presidency, it was kind of a fiasco, because Thieu and his lieutenants essentially pushed Ky out and planned to run against Minh. Big Minh had a coalition of all sorts of opposition elements, and they could never come together. He was skeptical both of his chances and of the possibilities for a fair election. So he just bowed out of the election, leaving the whole thing a fiasco, which was very harmful to congressional and American public support for our effort there.

But it was really fairly lively politics, considering it was a Third World country that was in the midst of a very difficult civil war.

On Thieu himself, he had serious faults, I think. He was not a charismatic figure. He did not do a good job of leading the public, explaining to the public, part of the chore of a great

leader. But he listened to people. And one of the strange phenomena was that I think he paid heed to all the political elements of the South.

He was an interesting contrast with Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem was a highly patriotic, highly moral man, who tried to build a new Vietnam based on what he thought were the best elements of South Vietnam society, which he tended to believe were those of the northern Catholics of his own background. He tended to discriminate against the Buddhist elements of South Vietnamese society. He was suspicious of them, and in the end, that caused the Buddhist riots, the An-queng Buddhist monks who led disturbances, and the generals who were increasingly restive under him.

As for Thieu, I found that if you listened to people all around, they all griped about Thieu, they all complained about him, but none of them felt that he was a vital threat to their group interests. And so, in a sense, he was a consensus leader.

And he had some real ability, both on the political side and the military side. His decisions at the very end of the war proved to be disastrous, pulling the Airborne out of I Corps and allowing General Phu to lead the retreat out of the highlands. They just opened the floodwaters to finally sweep away the Republic. But up to then, I think, both politically and militarily, Thieu had been a reasonably good leader for the country. I didn't see anybody else around who would have been better. I think we should have pressed him on his appointments of the division commanders, so that the caliber of the military leaders was raised higher than it was. But, looking back on it, he probably did a fairly good job, considering the difficulties of it all.

Shall we end on that?

Q: That's probably a good place to end.

SYLVESTER: I've talked long enough.

End of interview